

JFK remembered

Weisberg: questions unanswered

By NANCY LUSE
News-Post Staff

After all these years, the telephone still rings at the Weisberg house with calls from the media and researchers of the John F. Kennedy assassination. Lately, as the 25th anniversary of the president's slaying nears, the inquiries have been more frequent.

Harold Weisberg, Old Receiver Road, Frederick, the author of six books on the JFK assassination and one on the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., is considered one of the country's leading authorities on what has been called the crime of the century.

While a number of writers and documentarians have theorized about who was responsible for the president's death, Mr. Weisberg's work isn't "who done it." Rather, he points to how he believes this country's institutions broke down during a crisis.

"The system failed the people and it failed itself. The executive agencies, the press, the courts and Congress failed to meet an obliga-

(Continued on Page A-7)

Newsmen remember quite well

NEW YORK (AP) — Young CBS correspondent Dan Rather was standing just over a ridge from Dallas' Dealey Plaza, holding a yellow sack, waiting for a film drop from the cameraman in President Kennedy's motorcade.

"I saw what I thought was the president's limousine, and it seemed to make a wrong turn," Mr. Rather recalled recently. "It all went by in a blur.

"I knew something was wrong. You know when you know something, but you don't know why you know it? I went back over that ridge and saw an incredible scene. Some people were on the ground, some people were trying to cover children. It was a scene of great confusion."

Mr. Rather looked for a telephone but couldn't immediately find one. He sprinted to KRLD, the CBS affiliate, a few blocks away.

CBS anchor Walter Cronkite was in New York, working in the newsroom.

"I happened to be standing at the printer when the UP bulletin came across that shots had rung out in

(Continued on Page A-7)

Newsmen vividly recall

(Continued from Page A-1)

Dealey Plaza," he said. "As soon as we got that first report, we ordered up lines and got into the announce booth ... and started interrupting with voiceover bulletins on the ongoing program. And then we got the camera up there I think in about 10 minutes."

While Cronkite read wire reports on the air, Mr. Rather was at KRLD trying to confirm rumors that Mr. Kennedy was dead. The Parkland Memorial Hospital switchboard told him Mr. Kennedy was dead. KRLD's Eddie Barker had the head of the hospital saying he was dead. Mr. Rather finally got a surgeon and a priest who were in the emergency room to confirm that Mr. Kennedy was dead. Mr. Rather told New York. Cronkite went with it on the air.

"There wasn't any doubt in my mind," said Mr. Rather, who had beaten the opposition on the biggest story of their lives. "The official announcement wasn't made for another

17 minutes. It was a very long 17 minutes."

After those 17 minutes, Mr. Cronkite was handed a piece of wire copy. "From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official," he said solemnly, removing his glasses. "President Kennedy died at 1 p.m. Central Standard Time. Two o'clock Eastern Standard Time. Some 38 minutes ago." Mr. Cronkite choked

events that day in Dallas

up for a moment, on camera.

"This one really struck home," he recalled. "This was tearing the guts out."

"It was when you finally had to say the word, officially, that he was dead that it really impacted in the way it did."



Associated Press

Hands reach out to greet President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline as they arrive at the airport in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

JFK rememb

Harold Weisberg

(Continued from Page A-1)



Staff photo by Sam Yu

Harold Weisberg has spent the past 25 years thinking and writing about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His basement contains a wealth of information he accumulated, some of it through the Freedom of Information Act.

tion," Mr. Weisberg says, sitting in a recliner chair in his living room, sipping iced tea. Large windows offer a view of his wooded yard and a swimming pool which is a catch-all for fallen pine needles. Bird feeders hang from the house's eaves, attracting winged visitors.

"Finding out who did it would be wonderful, but the important thing today is to do whatever we can to see that it doesn't happen again. An assassination is the most subversive thing that can happen in our society," he said.

Mr. Weisberg, 75, who suffers from circulatory problems as well as failing eyesight, continues his fight for information, not only with the U.S. government, but also the private sector. He recently was successful in a lawsuit against the Zapruder family to gain access to the famous film footage of the shooting.

"I haven't dug a dry well yet. You saw what's down in the cellar," he said, referring to 60-some filing cabinets containing assassination information in addition to materials stashed in an upstairs study. Cardboard boxes full of books are in the living room ready for mailing. Orders are filled in the evening while he and his wife, Lillian, watch the news on TV.

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wrote about a system that failed

"I never got discouraged," he says of obstacles encountered in his work.

"I'm the first member of my family born in freedom . . . they gave me an obligation and I'm trying to meet it . . . I keep thinking of that poem by Robert Frost. 'We have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep.'"

The stumbling blocks were there almost from the beginning, he says, starting with the unwillingness of a publisher to print his first book, "Whitewash," because it disputed the official version of events.

"I went ahead and published it myself . . . if I had had a major publisher it would have been a runaway best seller" but "I didn't spend any time worrying over it."

He says he also doesn't dwell on things like a 2 a.m. phone call 10 years ago. The caller just played the musical soundtrack from the movie, *Shane*, the story of a man people were trying to run out of town. Nor did he dwell on a call his wife received when she was asked, "Aren't you afraid of something happening to your husband?"

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Mr. Weisberg was in his chicken house in Hyattstown, listening to music on the radio when the first news bulletin came across that President Kennedy

had been shot.

"I gathered the eggs as fast as I could and went to the house for the TV." While watching events unfold, "the first thing that struck me was that all sorts of things were happening that shouldn't be happening . . . I followed the papers and TV pretty closely, but nothing made any sense."

Soon after the assassination, Mr. Weisberg, then a farmer, but a man who had worked in newspapers, public relations, as a Senate investigator and in intelligence during World War II, began writing "Whitewash."

"I dictated, using two tape recorders. I worked around the clock," he recalls. The book came out as a limited edition in August 1965, and nine months later Mr. Weisberg published it himself in larger quantities.

"It's still used as the basic book on the subject," Mr. Weisberg says, and remains his favorite among the books he has written. "I did it under the most adverse conditions. I didn't even have a desk, I did it on the dining room table."

Requests for copies of "Whitewash" and his other books still come in, he says. "My books are documented and have stood the test of time."

But there are no plans for another tome, a decision based mainly on his declining health.

"I don't just write these things off the top of my head and I don't have anyone to search the files," he said.

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Mr. Weisberg can't believe it has been 25 years since that day in Dallas.

"It seems longer to me. I look back on it and wondered how in the hell I did it" although "other people made possible a lot of the things."

Would he do all again — the writing, the pushing for materials under the Freedom of Information Act?

"I never stop to think of it," he says.

He acknowledges pride in the accolades about his efforts — a judge, for instance, once called him the last of a dying breed of investigative reporters — but more than that has been the opportunity to work with a new generation who are equally dedicated.

College students, like Chip Selby of the University of Maryland who made a television documentary, are regular visitors to the Weisberg home, and for several years Mr. Weisberg has been a guest lecturer at Hood College. He even has bequeathed his mountain of information to the Frederick college.

Asked how he would like to be remembered, Mr. Weisberg pauses only for an instant. "As one who tried to make the system work."